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AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Gingrich Inc. *Up*

THE COMPLAINTS against Speaker Newt Gingrich before the House Ethics Committee fail in important ways to get at just why Mr. Gingrich's various political, fund-raising and academic enterprises have raised so many questions. The activities include a book he is writing, a college course he has taught, a political action committee he ran and a foundation in which he is heavily involved. All except the book break new ground. If you like Mr. Gingrich, you might argue that his actions are controversial because of the innovative way in which he sought to link ideas, politics and fund-raising. His critics think that, on the contrary, he has constructed a sophisticated laundry for political money—a laundry that may well operate *within* existing rules and laws but raises ethical questions nonetheless.

Many members of Congress have taught college courses. But Mr. Gingrich thought big. Tapes of his course were distributed through the Progress and Freedom Foundation. Employees of GOPAC, the political action committee, helped raise money (on their own time, says Mr. Gingrich) to finance the course, and it was carried on cable television. He effectively turned a college course into a Third Wave political sound truck.

Most members of Congress receive contributions from business people and interest groups. Few gave potential contributors the menu of choices offered by Mr. Gingrich. They could give not only to his own campaigns but also to GOPAC or to the Progress and Freedom Foundation. GOPAC's purpose is to help Republicans win election to state and local office, but its projects included distributing inspirational tapes by which Mr. Gingrich spread his political message.

In the meantime, two of the foundation's largest endeavors involved organizing Mr. Gingrich's course and financing his call-in television show. Contributors to the foundation and to GOPAC's accounts for state and local candidates could give unlimited amounts. Until recently, they could give anonymously. Only under some pressure have the two organizations made some public disclosures.

On the basis of the evidence offered so far, it

seems that none of this was illegal or in violation of the rules, partly because the activities of his political empire are beyond the imagination of those who wrote the ethics rules. But it is also plain that Mr. Gingrich did not trouble himself much over the potentially thorny ethical questions raised by his enterprises.

The four basic complaints before the Ethics Committee get at the interesting questions raised by all this only tangentially. The most

direct challenge concerns whether Mr. Gingrich improperly used his foundation to finance the college course, which, say detractors, had an overt political purpose.

The second concerns his famous book deal. Mr. Gingrich, you'll recall, won a \$4.5 million advance from a publishing company owned by a company owned by Rupert Murdoch. Mr. Gingrich defended the advance, but eventually turned it down.

The third complaint involves a cable company that has carried Mr. Gingrich's course for free. Is this an unethical gift of television time?

Finally, and a bit comically, Mr. Gingrich is accused of using the House floor—remember, House proceedings are broadcast on C-SPAN—to plug a toll-free number for ordering tapes of his course.

On the book issue, as we have said in this space before, while the deal raised some questions, it was not unethical on its face—many other members of Congress have written books. But the assortment of questions, especially those relating to the course, the political action committee and the foundation, deserve looking into, if only to clarify whether Mr. Gingrich was too quick to fuzz over distinctions as among types of money raised and the purposes to which the money could properly be put. Limits have been placed on what kinds of financial contributions officials can accept. From one point of view, Mr. Gingrich has been brilliant at finding inventive ways to

propagate his ideas. From another, he has fudged the limits.

That defines the basic question the House Ethics Committee, chaired by Rep. Nancy Johnson (R-Conn.), will have to answer. Ms. Johnson has earned a reputation for integrity. Partly because of that, Republicans argue that there is no need for any outside counsel or ethics adviser to look into the matter. Naturally, the Democrats would like nothing better than to put a special counsel on Mr. Gingrich's back.

But an independent counsel or other type of outside adviser or arbiter is neither warranted nor required by what is known. The Ethics Committee should try to sort through this matter itself. That's what it's there for. One possible outcome might be a finding that Mr. Gingrich did not violate any rules or laws but that the rules themselves are inadequate. In that case, the House could go on to address itself not to the speaker's past behavior but to fixing the rules under which he and everyone else would operate in the future.